

Good evening, and thank you all for giving me the chance once again to summarize what our community has done over the past year and what I hope and expect us to do in the 12 months ahead.

This is my eighth State of the City address, and while I have many great memories of my first seven years in office, it is safe to say that 2020 is the one that kept me up at night the most.

We had it all last year. A worldwide pandemic unlike anything we have seen in a century. A plunging economy that gave us a glimpse of the Great Depression 80 years ago. And a wave of protests rivaling those from the 1960s – protests that call on all of us to confront racial injustices and how we can fix them.

If all of these were not enough, we also had a divisive presidential election followed by a deeply troubling aftermath that is testing who we are as a nation.

As all of these events played out last year, I am proud to say that the local governments in Woodford County responded to these challenges as well as, if not better than, any other community in the commonwealth.

The era of good feeling that binds our three local governments paid off last year. Our department heads, employees, and private citizens faced adversity head on and didn't back down. Because of that, I am proud to report that the State of the City is strong and getting stronger.

While four-fifths of our governing was dominated by COVID-19, we still accomplished great things in spite of it. For example, we worked with the heads of the first responder agencies, Woodford Fiscal Court and Midway City Council to enact a dedicated 911 funding mechanism that will ensure our first point of contact with citizens in an emergency will be able to modernize and operate without worrying about the threat of budget cuts.

We also completed construction of our new police station and wastewater treatment plant. These investments give our citizens the long-term stability they need and deserve when it comes to these important public services.

Beyond those accomplishments, we also finalized both the money and plans for a walking path on the U.S. 60 bypass. . .

We added much needed street lights on Lexington Road at the Kroger and Marsailles Drive entrances . . .

We honored the contributions and legacy of Rev. H.T. Keeton by renaming Water Street after him . . .

We hired a code enforcement officer, who has since made great strides in tackling nuisance issues around the city, and . . .

We promoted banners to honor local Veterans and high school seniors.

In a year that looked like it could be devastating financially in March, we nonetheless were able to complete the fiscal year in strong financial position. I am proud of that and believe that success can continue in the months ahead.

Because COVID introduced so much uncertainty, I want to take a minute to talk about our city's response. I won't cover everything we did, but do believe a summary is in order.

First, we were thorough. We were able to protect our employees and assist our citizens and businesses. We were able to secure almost \$900,000 in CARES Act funding, about half of which was sent as direct cash assistance to our small businesses. This helped 95 firms weather this unprecedented hardship.

Just as importantly, we also used CARES Act money to create an assistance program for individuals to help with their rent, mortgage and utility payment, pushing out as of today more than \$37,000.

As for the city government, our buildings and vehicles have been regularly sanitized, while our employees have been given the flexibility they need to maintain social distancing and protect themselves and their families.

That meant investing more in technology to improve working remotely. Our finances were aided by a decision to temporarily reduce about 1/3 of our workforce to 20 hours per week and allow the federal unemployment benefit to fill their wage gaps while allowing us to book substantial savings.

Our employees have pivoted to continue providing great service to our citizens and customers while protecting themselves and others from unnecessary exposure to COVID. We will continue doing what we must until this battle is won and the members of our community are safe and vaccinated.

When social unrest broke out across the United States in response to instances of racial injustice, our community became more united. Chief Murray and I are active members of the Unity Task Force that was created to bring us together in our community and to help prop up those in need.

Our boards and commissions are increasingly more diverse, buoyed by matching efforts at the county level and in Midway. We will continue doing everything we can to remain a city where diversity is celebrated and people from all walks of life feel welcome and embraced.

The last 12 months have brought monumental challenges, but I firmly believe that the next 12 months will bring once-in-a-generation opportunities. When we get to the other side of the pandemic, communities will have the opportunity to write their own future.

The business community will experience a reset of sorts, and the conventional way of thinking and making economic decisions within firms will be turned on its head. Supply chains will be reexamined and the potential benefit to moving once written-off industries back to the states will be tremendous.

Versailles needs to be well-positioned to capitalize on opportunities to grow our economy in this next year. Among the things we need to explore are enacting a series of incentives in ordinance to distinguish us from other communities and put ourselves more in the driver's seat in negotiations with site selectors.

We need to finalize marketing materials that highlight the positive aspects of investing in Versailles. And we need to reach conclusion of the Edgewood litigation so that what is arguably the best industrial site in the commonwealth of Kentucky is available for sale. We already have available industrial property under roof in the old Ledvance building and small lots coming online at Falling Springs Business Park. Now, we need to use these lures to hook generation-changing employers.

I still believe we need to seriously look at updating the way we tax businesses. The method we use now is simple, for sure, but leads to a disproportionate burden on businesses that operate solely within the city limits of Versailles. A shift to a gross receipts tax structure would likely result in less revenue for the city, but the revenue stream would be less susceptible to economic downturns and more fairly distributed across businesses.

We also need to continue working with strategic partners in government, industry and the chamber of commerce to strengthen our workforce offering.

I also believe we need to have a robust discussion about a possible restaurant tax. I have talked to too many Mayors who have implemented this program, and they tout the benefits to their communities. We need to analyze the impact this measure would have on our restaurant industry and our constituents, and if we decide to move forward with a proposal, we need to account for every dollar raised from this tax before anything is written into law. By statute, this revenue could only be spent to advance tourism, but the courts have broadly interpreted that requirement, with the acknowledgement that a lot of quality of life improvements in a community also serve to enhance tourism potential. The citizens must be engaged at every step of this discussion, because if they don't buy in to it, we should abandon the idea.

One area where I am committed to investing more right now is making sure all of the residential water meters in our system are new and have advanced technology. Not only do new meters increase the accuracy of readings, they will reduce the manpower needed to read meters and allow customers access to real-time data concerning their usage. Customers will be able to sign up for notices that will alert them when their usage has increased by a set percentage during a billing period. This will let our residents avoid surprise bills when an undetected leak has occurred and give them more ownership of the process.

Judge Kay and I are also committed to having sidewalks along the entirety of High Street to Falling Springs Blvd come and to have that done this year. We will work with our respective

staffs and area residents to determine the best way to complete this necessary project in a quick and affordable manner.

With transportation in mind, we must also continue to focus on making our streets safer and reducing the number of traffic fatalities in Woodford County. 2020 was an extremely deadly year on Woodford County roads, and we need to complete an analysis of our transportation system to see what actions we can take to improve safety and efficiency.

Looking ahead, I would like to see the completion of informational packets that would be given to all new residents of Versailles and Woodford County. This would contain important contact information, a summary of government services, and a listing of churches, non-profits, restaurants and shopping options. We want to make sure they feel right at home as soon as possible.

Speaking of feeling at home, we are making progress toward announcing a community garden here in the city this spring. Details remain to be ironed out and the County Horticulture Extension Agent is looking at possible ways that we can operate the program.

We should continue exploring all options relating to either a fun center or splash pad – not only for local youth but also to promote tourism opportunities. Along those same lines, my commitment remains to establish a Maker Space and STEM lab to help our children – especially those at a financial disadvantage – get a leg up in these increasingly important economic sectors. We will follow-up on improvements to Apollo Park to restore basketball courts for local youth and to examine ways to make the skate park there more attractive to kids.

Our attention will remain focused on the possibilities surrounding improvements at Big Spring Park and supporting completion of the Huntertown Community Interpretative Park.

There are a myriad of other smaller yet important projects that will consume our energy this year, and working together we can accomplish a great deal of the things we need to do to improve the quality of life in Versailles.

Greater than any specific policy proposal, however, is our need to do our part to unite folks. There has not been greater polarization in my lifetime. People in 2020 were divided over politics, public health measures, vaccinations, and racial issues. We can't allow ourselves to treat everyone as if we are all on separate teams while making defeat of the other side our only goal.

Washington is broken because that mindset has prevailed for so long. Our national leaders should look to local governments around the country, because we are the policy innovators, we are showing how to serve constituents effectively and efficiently, and local governments are symbols of what government at all levels should be.

I'm proud of what we have done at the local level in Versailles, and I'm excited about what we are poised to do. We have a unique opportunity as the government closest to the people to rebuild the foundation of a more perfect union and to do it in a way that promotes civility.

We have to set an example for our youth, to show them how adults at the head of government are supposed to act. We should have disagreements, and we should all remain passionate about our individual positions. That is an integral part of the governing process, but we must all respect one another and show that just because we may have policy differences with a person, that does not make them evil, or corrupt, or ignorant. Reasonable people can disagree about important issues.

One of my personal hallmarks in these State of the City speeches is quoting Paul Prather, the former reporter and now current religion columnist for the Herald Leader.

Mr. Prather continually inspires me to explore different perspectives and appreciate life more, but a Prather is now making more of an impact here at home. The people of this community have benefited from the strong leadership of Mr. Prather's daughter-in-law Cassie, who serves as the Woodford County Public Health Director. But I digress...

In an October article, Mr. Prather was speaking of the great divides in our nation, and how it takes faith to make it through the end of these proverbial battles unscathed. He says, **"We have to keep our wits about us. We have to remind ourselves that, ultimately, God's still in control of every situation, and that every situation, no matter how unsettling, is only temporary. We don't know God's plan, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have one."**

"We have to remember that what really matters—what we'll be held accountable for in the end—is that we demonstrate love and forgiveness toward those on the other side of this country's divide. We're commanded to be peacemakers always. Especially now."

He closes the article with his usual wit:

"Good luck, God bless and God willing I'll see you on the other side of this mess. Unless an asteroid hits us first."

Demonization of political opponents has gone on long enough, and to preserve our republic, it must stop. Yesterday we celebrated the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is an appropriate time to reflect on the changes he inspired, all without throwing even a single punch.

Let me be clear: Any protest that erupts in violence and destruction of property is never okay. Never. Too many brave men and women have shed blood in foreign lands defending our freedoms to allow this type of strife to happen at home.

No matter which side of the political aisle you are on . . . no matter whom you voted for in elections, non-violent protests are a right and a necessary component of our democracy. They bring awareness to issues and pressure decision-makers. They help us heal. Riots, though, are only designed to hurt, to be a show of power above all else. That is not what this country was founded on.

Our society needs to be more optimistic. A negativity that has been greatly fueled in the darker corners of social media has become too prevalent. Many decision makers are reluctant to act because they fear criticism, even if much of it is grounded in fiction and based on conspiracy theories. Or, sometimes even worse than inaction, leaders are drawn to this new brand of populism that, while irrational and uninformed, is popular among keyboard warriors.

Despite these things, I remain optimistic about 2021 and beyond, because our community is optimistic. It has come together during times of difficulty and it stands ready to take on the challenges ahead. That mix of family, hope, and vision is exactly what we need to thrive. We may not be perfect...but we aren't done yet.

In ending, let me say that I am sincerely looking forward to this year and am ready to roll my sleeves up and get to work with this council, our department heads and employees, and interested citizens as we lay the foundation for a prosperous post-COVID Versailles.

May God continue to bless us on our path forward.